

# Baucus meeting targets legislation, US 2 work, internet

SDMS Document ID



2031656

BY ROGER MORRIS

Western News Publisher

Pending federal legislation, the need for broadband, quick improvements to U.S. Highway 2 and a solution to unsightly buildings left standing in Libby were discussed Thursday during a meeting with U.S. Senator Max Baucus on the asbestos issue.

On discussion about pending federal legislation that would provide relief for corporations being sued nationwide by a variety of different asbestos victims, the Montana senator asked how much money was needed per Libby victim for health care.

On prompting, Dr. Alan Whitehouse said it costs about \$500,000 per patient with the majority of the expense coming at the end of treatment. Whitehouse has 1500 patients now which means \$750 million is needed in a trust for healthcare for existing Libby victims. The trust fund being proposed in federal legislation has ranged from \$130 million to \$140 million.

The trusts fund would be created by contributions from the various "asbestos" companies and insurance companies involved.

"Some members of congress are starting to balk," Baucus said. "They say it's not right to take that much money out of these companies."

"I've told them flat out that I'm not going to support this legislation and will oppose this legislation unless language is added for Libby people," Baucus said. "I'm going to hold their feet to the fire."

"If there are loopholes, I'm going to gum up the works until the are filled."

However, Baucus said something has to be done.

"My main focus is Libby but many companies are going to go bankrupt without legislation," he said. "They're not like Grace but they do have the liabilities."

One man told Baucus he couldn't get needed oxygen

through the health plan provided by W.R. Grace, the responsible party for the asbestos problem in Libby.

"They're telling me I don't need oxygen," the man said. "I don't care about a bunch of money in my pocket, I want the health care."

In a discussion of how the St. John's Lutheran Hospital is helping out, board chairman Connie Welter said the hospital provides cat-scans and x-rays but has a need for broadband access to the internet for transferring x-rays to specialists elsewhere in the country.

One older man said the 12-mile section of Swamp Creek, on U.S. 2, needs to be completed, to make traveling safer for those who go to Kalispell for health care needs.

"We have to call Jim Lynch, the new director of the highway department," Baucus said. He turned to an aide, and said, "Make a note to remind me to call him."

Brad Black, director of the Center for Asbestos Related Disease, said the Community Health Clinic is outgrowing its existing facilities

"It's bursting out of its seams," said Black, who is on the CHC board of directors. "We need a new location. It's another area that would make a difference in what we're trying to do here."

Libby Fire Chief Tom Wood asked the senator to help get older dilapidated buildings in Libby razed as both a safety issue and as part of the economic development effort.

Wood said the buildings contain asbestos contaminated vermiculite but are not considered cleanup priorities by the EPA, which is focusing on occupied buildings.

"We gotta get these buildings razed," Wood said. "Can you push some buttons to get these 8-10 eyesores taken care of?"

WESTERN NEWS

Libby MT 59923

Wednesday & Friday

MAR - 2 2005

Superior Clipping Service

Glendive MT 406-377-6612

